



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Violence in the Arts by John Fraser

Review by: Nathaniel Teich

Film Quarterly, Vol. 28, No. 4, Special Book Issue (Summer, 1975), pp. 46-47

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211655>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 19:37

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

in *flagrante* with her soldier lover. The enraged husband grabs a red-hot poker and brands the soldier on the shoulder. The inexorably advancing soldiers on the Odessa Steps in *Potemkin* and the helmeted Teutonic Knights in *Alexander Nevsky*, according to Eisenstein, were derived from a childhood memory of the time his mother walked toward him with a cold stare and denied she was his mother. Barna does not explain what to make of these memories, repeatedly leaving the reader to ask, so what? The level of inquiry shown in these examples characterizes the whole of Barna's attempt to link Eisenstein the man with his artistic work.

When Barna does venture a judgment of his own, the result is not apt to be helpful. In his discussion of Eisenstein's decision in 1918 to leave his architecture studies and enlist in the Red Army, Barna writes: "Even then the decision seems not to have been his own, but a collective one taken by the students *en bloc*, the Institute closing down as a result. For the first time in his life Eisenstein savoured the freedom of deciding his own destiny." The author is unaware of his own confusion. Another time we are told that "a basic theme that recurs constantly [in Eisenstein's films] is that of life and death." In the absence of a supportive and sophisticated critical context there is nothing to rescue this statement from its inherent triteness.

There are a few illuminating passages to be found in *Eisenstein*. Barna convincingly argues that the tragic aspects of *Que Viva Mexico!* should not be allowed to overshadow the positive creative upheaval Eisenstein experienced in Mexico. In his discussion of *Alexander Nevsky*, he clearly shows how Eisenstein's theoretical conception of the historical film shaped the film's narrative and visual style. Nevertheless, throughout most of this biography, my mind kept returning to a self-caricature drawn by Eisenstein that is reproduced early in the book. It is a sketch of a rotund little man wrapped in a greatcoat, wearing a floppy hat, and standing alone. The hands are buried in pockets and the brim of the hat covers most of the face so that all one can really see of the man himself are a few coils of wiry hair and a shy smile. Here,

clothed in elaborate self-protection, is a personality who cares to show very little of his inner self. Yon Barna lifts the brim on the little man's hat just enough to reveal a sly wink.

—TOM SCHMIDT

VIOLENCE IN THE ARTS

By John Fraser. New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1974. \$5.95.

Because violence in films and in the other arts is an issue so pervasive and difficult to deal with, John Fraser's little book deserves to be read widely as an important contribution to our ongoing thought and debate. He defines an evolving genre, "the Violation Movie" (e.g., *Straw Dogs*), in which rape is the ultimate "invasion of the privacy of 'decent' people by violent men." Since Fraser analyzes recent controversial films with the aim of establishing principles of an aesthetics of violence, his discussions are not limited by the fact that new violent works of art and events in actual life continue to assault us and capture our attention. Thus if Fraser is not more timely than *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Godfather*, we can add such current examples as *The Exorcist*, *Going Places*, *Death Wish*, *The Klansman*, or others fitting the definition of Grand Guignolesque shockingly detailed violence, gore, and flowing blood (for a new appraisal of this genre named from "Théâtre du Grand Guignol," see F. Déak in *The Drama Review*, 18 [Mar. 1974], 34–43).

Violence in the Arts does not treat film or any other medium in isolation; however, Fraser neatly states the central importance of film in discussions of contemporary culture: "I have taken a good many of my examples from movies, since these days movies are what classical Latin literature once was to educated people—the one cultural topic that they almost all have in common and feel strongly about." The strength and insights of Fraser's book are the result of the breadth and depth of knowledge of the arts that he brings into focus and highlights with appropriate social and political analysis. The span of his reading and viewing encompasses G. Legman and Hannah Arendt on violence, Susan Sontag on pop culture, Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, gangsterism, Nazism, and political torturing, de Sade, Céline, Goya, Orwell, Godard, Peckinpah, Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, detective thrillers by Ambler, Household, and MacDonald, *Les yeux sans visage* by Franju (who is, to Fraser, "the most distinguished living French director, next to Renoir").

Fraser's book is held together not by the strings of references to obscure and second-rate fiction we might

not have read or films not seen, but rather by his approach to the issue of violence. He calls the book "a personal essay." It is written simply and engagingly; at times it is idiosyncratic, yet it always exhibits a discriminating critical intelligence. The book succeeds precisely because this difficult cultural and social topic is

filtered through the mind of an alert and sensitive humanist. This approach is certainly equal to, if not more valuable than, data gathered by behaviorists, testimony given to congressional committees, experiments on audience responses, and heavy-handed moralizing or politicizing.
—NATHANIEL TEICH

SHORTER REVIEWS

Critical Studies of Film-Makers

THE WESTERN FILMS OF JOHN FORD

By J. A. Place. New York: Citadel, 1974; \$12.00.

This intelligent survey is the first in a two-volume study of Ford. It primarily employs a narrative-thematic approach, but there are occasional pieces of stylistic analysis also. The discussion of Ford's stories and themes is thoughtful and careful, and the book comprises an authoritative guide to the structures and bearings of the films. It is, however, extremely respectful and accepting, and its perceptions about race in Ford, for instance in comparing *The Searchers* and *Two Rode Together*, are never pushed to much incisiveness; so that on both race and the westernization mythology generally Place comes off as rather bland. It is easy now (too easy!) to say that anybody eulogized by Richard Nixon can't be all good, but the fact sets the problem: Ford's quintessential true-Americanism, which will doubtless be seen in time as both his curse (artistic and social) and his glory, badly needs serious re-examination. But that is to ask for another book.

MARVELLOUS MELIES

By Paul Hammond. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975. \$10.00.

Curiously, there has heretofore been no book in English on Méliès, despite his enormous historical importance and the fact that many of his films retain their charm and vivacity after more than 70 years. (A number of lovely tinted ones have been restored by Kemp R. Niver.) Ham-

mond's book, which is beautifully illustrated and more carefully researched than any of the French works on Méliès, goes into enough biographical detail to show how the films grew organically out of Méliès's work as a conjurer. While they did not contribute to the development of narrative film syntax (which went fastest in America and Britain) they did develop many of the intraframe and between-frame resources of the cinema that have remained important to experimental film-makers; and it would be churlish to deny that Méliès's particular brand of fancy (Hammond insists, for instance, on the pure-vs.-seductive-women theme in Méliès—one he could hardly have escaped, since he was married to a stolid Dutch woman and had a fiery Parisian woman as mistress) found an appropriate home in the film medium. Hammond also throws a little historical cold water on the famous Lumière-Méliès dichotomy, which has been made so much of. Méliès, it turns out, made films about trains, beaches, and harbors too. Like Salles Gomes's study of Vigo, this essential book brings a key French film-maker to English readers.

Eisenstein. New York: Dutton, 1974. \$8.95 paper. A gorgeously printed (gravure illustrations!) work, but with a curious unauthored text, translated from the French, including a previously unpublished Eisenstein essay and what amount to extended captions for the pictures.

The Hollywood Professionals, Vol. 2: Henry King, Lewis Milestone, Sam Wood. New York: A. S. Barnes, 1974. \$2.95.